Benjamin Mee Zoo True Story

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INTRODUCTION: THE MAN BEHIND THE HEADLINES

When Hollywood decides to adapt a real-life story for the big screen, it often takes liberties with the facts. The 2011 film **We Bought a Zoo**, starring Matt Damon and Scarlett Johansson, charmed millions with its tale of a family who risks everything to revive a rundown animal park. But what many people do not realize is that the film is based on an extraordinary true story — the story of Benjamin Mee and his family's audacious purchase of Dartmoor Zoological Park in England. The **Benjamin Mee zoo true story** is far richer, more complex, and more inspiring than the Hollywood version. It is a narrative of grief, resilience, hard work, and an unshakable belief that sometimes the wildest dreams are worth chasing.

In this article, we will dive deep into the real-life events that sparked the book and the film, explore the challenges Benjamin Mee faced,

and uncover what life is really like running a zoo — and how the true story continues to evolve today.

WHO IS BENJAMIN MEE? A BACKGROUND ON THE REAL ZOOKEEPER

Before he became known as the man who bought a zoo, Benjamin Mee was a journalist and editor living in the south of England. Born in 1965, Mee had a love for animals and adventure that was shaped by his childhood. He worked for publications such as *The Guardian* and *The Sunday Times*, where he covered topics ranging from travel to wildlife. But his life took a tragic turn when his wife, Katherine, was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Determined to provide his family with a new purpose and a fresh start, Mee began searching for a property that could also house a business opportunity — something that would bring joy, meaning, and a future for his two young children, Milo and Ella.

In 2006, while still mourning Katherine's illness and eventual death, Mee stumbled upon a dilapidated zoo in Devon: Dartmoor Zoological Park. The park had been closed to the public after financial troubles and regulatory issues. It housed around 200 animals — many of them large, dangerous, and in need of proper care. Most people would have walked away. But Benjamin Mee saw something else: a chance to

rebuild a life, honor his late wife's memory, and teach his children about courage and second chances.

THE PURCHASE: HOW BENJAMIN MEE BOUGHT A REAL ZOO

The **Benjamin Mee zoo true story** officially begins in 2006 when he first visited Dartmoor Zoo. The property was a mess: enclosures were falling apart, the animals were malnourished, and the staff morale was rock bottom. Mee had no experience running a zoo, but he had a background in biology (he studied psychology and biology at university) and an unshakeable optimism. He convinced his brother and his mother to pool their savings with his own to purchase the 33-acre site.

Buying a zoo is not like buying a house. The Mee family had to deal with complex licensing requirements from the UK government, meet strict animal welfare standards, and secure enough funding to bring the park back to life. They used their entire inheritance from Katherine's life insurance and sold their home. The risk was enormous. But Benjamin Mee believed that if he could make the zoo work, it would provide a legacy for his children and a tribute to his wife's battling spirit.

The Real

Challenges: More Than a Movie Plot

The film simplifies many of the struggles the family faced. In reality, the **Benjamin Mee zoo true story** includes a near-fatal encounter with a lion, the threat of bankruptcy, and the constant pressure of keeping a zoo operational with very little money. The famous line from the film — “Why not?” — is real, but the moments of despair were just as vivid.

- **Financial strain:** The family poured every penny into the zoo, often going without personal comforts.
- **Animal emergencies:** A tiger escaped its enclosure on one occasion (something not shown in the film), and a bear named Boki required constant attention.
- **Staff issues:** Most of the existing staff left, and Mee had to learn on the job, even cleaning enclosures and feeding animals himself.
- **Regulatory battles:** The zoo had to meet stringent health

and safety standards before it could reopen, which took years of unpaid labor.

What the film captures beautifully, however, is the emotional core: a family dealing with grief while embracing a wild new life. The real Benjamin Mee has stated that the movie "got the spirit right," even if it changed some details for dramatic effect.

FROM REAL LIFE TO BOOK: "WE BOUGHT A ZOO"

Benjamin Mee documented the entire process in his 2008 memoir, also titled *We Bought a Zoo*. The book recounts the raw, often funny, and sometimes heartbreaking journey of transforming a near-ruined zoo into a thriving conservation center. It is much darker and more detailed than the movie — for example, it includes the story of Katherine's death and how the zoo became a way for the family to heal.

The book was a surprise bestseller in the UK and later caught the attention of film producers. It was optioned by 20th Century Fox, and Cameron Crowe directed the film adaptation. Though the movie changes many characters (for example, the zookeeper Kelly in the film is a composite of several real people), the central premise remains true: a family buys a zoo and rebuilds their lives.

THE HOLLYWOOD ADAPTATION: FACT VS. FICTION

For fans of the movie, it is fascinating to see where the **Benjamin Mee zoo true story** diverges from the on-screen version. Here are some key differences:

1. **Katherine's death:** In the film, she is already deceased from the start. In real life, Katherine was alive when Mee bought the zoo, and she helped with the early planning. She passed away shortly after the purchase.
2. **Children's ages:** In the film, the children are a teenager and a younger daughter. In reality, Milo was only 8 and Ella was 4 at the time of the purchase.
3. **The zookeeper:** The character of Kelly (played by Scarlett Johansson) is not a single person; the real zoo had a team of keepers, including a man named David, who was the head keeper.
4. **The tiger escape:** A dramatic scene in the film involves a tiger getting out, but that was added for tension. The real escape involved a different, smaller animal.

Despite these changes, Mee has said he is

proud of the film because it introduces the world to the real struggles of small zoos and the importance of wildlife conservation.

LIFE AFTER THE MOVIE: THE LEGACY OF THE TRUE STORY

When *We Bought a Zoo* premiered, it brought a flood of attention to Dartmoor Zoo. Visitor numbers skyrocketed, and the park was able to make long-needed improvements. However, the fame was not without its challenges. The zoo had to manage the sudden influx of tourists while continuing its conservation work. Benjamin Mee used the newfound resources to expand facilities, improve animal welfare, and launch education programs.

Today, Dartmoor Zoological Park (also known as Dartmoor Zoo) is a thriving charity and conservation center. It houses lions, tigers, monkeys, and many other species, many of which have been rescued from poor conditions. The zoo participates in international breeding programs and runs a successful “Big Cat” sanctuary. Benjamin Mee continues to serve as a director, though he has stepped back from day-to-day management. He also gives motivational talks about resilience, risk-taking, and the power of following your heart even when logic says no.

What the True Story Teaches Us

The **Benjamin Mee zoo true story** is not just about animals or a business venture; it is about what happens when ordinary people commit to extraordinary goals. Mee's journey demonstrates that:

- Grief can be transformed into action.
- It is never too late to change directions in life.
- Family bonds can be strengthened through shared struggle.
- Animals have the power to heal and connect us.
- Conservation starts with small, local efforts.

The story also highlights the often-unseen work behind zoos. Many people criticize zoos outright, but places like Dartmoor Zoo that are run ethically provide vital care for endangered species and educate the public about wildlife. Benjamin Mee's zoo has become a model for how a small, family-run zoo can make a big impact.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW? BENJAMIN MEE AND FAMILY

Mee's children, Milo and Ella, are now grown. Both have been

involved with the zoo in various capacities. Milo worked as a keeper, and Ella has written about the family's experiences online. Benjamin Mee himself remains a prominent figure in the zoo world and has written a second book, *The Zoo That Saved Me*, which delves deeper into his mental health journey.

The zoo itself continues to operate year-round. It avoids the over-commercialization that plagues some bigger parks, staying true to its roots as a rescue center. In 2019, it was named "Zoo of the Year" by the UK's BIAZA (British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums).

BEHIND THE REAL STORY

CONCLUSION: THE MAGIC

The **Benjamin Mee zoo true story** is a powerful reminder that the best stories are often the ones that actually happen. While the Hollywood movie captured the heart, the real-life tale is richer, more complex, and ultimately more inspiring. It shows that with courage, family, and an unwavering belief in second chances, even the most impossible dream can become a reality. Whether you visit Dartmoor Zoo, read the book, or watch the film, the legacy of Benjamin Mee continues to prove that sometimes you have to take a leap of faith — and land in a zoo.